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SUBJECT: KERALA CHIEF MINISTER ACHUTHANANDAN: VINTAGE  
COMMUNIST TAKES CHARGE

REF: CHENNAI 0960

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Eighty three years old and with little formal education, Kerala's new Chief Minister V.S. Achuthanandan of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) is different from the state's previous communist Chief Ministers in that he hails from a low-caste and working class background. Within the party, he leads a faction that shuns reform and liberalization. In his cabinet, he is surrounded by party opponents who hate his egocentric style and policy inflexibility. He has been on the forefront of the ongoing agitation against Coca Cola's bottling plant in Kerala. Despite his "lone crusader" image and his current popularity in the state, he is unlikely to make Kerala more business-friendly and create jobs for its five million unemployed. END SUMMARY

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SIX DECADES OF PARTY EXPERIENCE, NONE AS MINISTER  
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12. (SBU) Velikkakathu Sankaran (V.S.) Achuthanandan, "VS" to party comrades, became Chief Minister of Kerala on May 18, 2006. After leading the CPI(M) and its coalition, the Left Democratic Front (LDF), to a massive electoral victory earlier in the month, Achuthanandan emerged as a frontrunner for the post, riding a wave of popular support. The Chief Minister's job is an entirely new experience for him, however. He has been a communist party worker for 66 years, a party politburo member for ten years, a member of the state assembly for five terms, and the opposition leader in the state assembly twice. Achuthanandan, however, has never held a minister's post.

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A BORN FIGHTER WHO CAME UP THROUGH STRUGGLES  
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13. (SBU) Achuthanandan was born on October 20, 1923 in a poor, "Ezhava" (lower caste of palm toddy-tappers) home in Paravur village in the coastal Alleppey district of the then-princely state of Travancore, southern Kerala. He advanced in life and the party through a series of struggles. At the age of four, he lost his mother, and at 11, his father. At age 12, Achuthanandan had to discontinue his education when he was in seventh grade to assist his brother in a small

textile shop. Later, Achuthanandan took a job in a company that made soldiers' tents. In 1939, at the age of 16, he joined the Kerala Congress party, then fighting for Indian independence. The times were turbulent: his Ezhava caste was at that time organizing agitations against upper caste Hindus who denied them access to temples. The nascent Communist movement was focusing on the lower castes and poor people in coastal areas, organizing trade unions and party units. Achuthanandan was attracted to this movement of the have-nots and became a member of the Communist Party at age 17.

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BAPTISM BY FIRE: HIS ROLE IN THE COMMUNIST UPRISING  
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14. (SBU) Achuthanandan took active part in the violent Communist uprising against the Travancore state police in 1946. In what is known as the "Punnapra-Vayalar agitation," rural communists from Achuthanandan's neighborhood attacked the police with wooden spears, leading to police firings that killed an estimated 300 communists. The police quelled the uprising in four days. Achuthanandan went into hiding but was arrested a few days later, severely tortured, and imprisoned for four years at the Central Jail in Thiruvananthapuram city, where he now presides over the state government. Later, during the 1960's, Achuthanandan was imprisoned several times along with other Indian communist leaders on political charges. He has years of experience conducting political work while remaining "underground," cunningly evading arrest.

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AMBITION FULFILLED AFTER MISSING THRICE  
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15. (SBU) One of the few surviving founder-leaders of the CPI(M), Achuthanandan has contested eight state assembly elections and won five (1967, 1970, 1991, 2001, and 2006). Twice he worked as opposition leader in the state assembly (1992-96, and 2001-06). In the party, he has held important positions for half a century: District Secretary of the undivided Communist Party of India from 1956; National Council Member from 1959; Central Committee Member of CPI(M) from 1964; party State Secretary from 1980-1992; and party politburo member since 1986. His hopes of becoming the Chief Minister of Kerala were dashed on three different occasions: in 1991, he won the state elections but his party lost; in 1996, his party won but he lost; and in 2001, he won again but again his party lost.

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FIVE YEARS OF CAMPAIGNS AGAINST CORRUPTION  
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16. (SBU) It was Achuthanandan's latest role as Opposition Leader (2001-06) that earned him much of the popularity he enjoys today. Projecting a "lone crusader" image, he relentlessly attacked allegedly corrupt and morally wayward politicians. Some of these attacks were directed against his own party colleagues, which helped boost his personal reputation. For example, while he relentlessly attacked Muslim League minister Kunjalikkutty for his alleged involvement in a sexual harassment case, indirectly, he was also hitting hard at his own party colleagues who, as sitting ministers, had allegedly helped Kunjalikkutty escape prosecution. In another sex scandal, Achuthanandan hinted that two of his own

party colleagues had played a role in the affair, embarrassing them in public. He chose not to support his own party State Secretary, Pinarayi Vijayan, when allegations of corruption were raised against Vijayan on a deal with the Canadian power company, SNC Lavalin. Achuthanandan has championed the strong agitation against the Coca Cola facility in Kerala, even though the bottling plant was established during the LDF government's 1996-2001 term. (See Chennai 0109 and Previous).

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A FACTIONALIST SURROUNDED BY PARTY OPPONENTS  
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17. (SBU) Achuthanandan's political campaigns have created bitter enemies within his own party. Several CPI(M) state leaders, members of the party's powerful State Secretariat, who hate his egocentric style and policy inflexibility, plotted to refuse him a seat to contest in the recent assembly elections. As a result, his name did not figure in the list of candidates originally announced by the party. His omission created a huge uproar. Achuthanandan's supporters marched in the streets, chanting slogans against party bosses. Fearing a major popular backlash, the CPI(M) politburo, in an unprecedented decision, reconsidered and brought Achuthanandan to the electoral fray. The massive victory the CPI(M) scored in the election vindicated the decision and catapulted him to the Chief Minister's chair.

18. (SBU) According to the Post's journalist sources, factionalism is still raging in the Kerala CPI(M). The party has refused the Chief Minister the traditional Home portfolio, fearing that he would use the state police to settle political scores. Adding to the embarrassment, Achuthanandan had to give up the vigilance portfolio -- another potent weapon -- to a party colleague within a few days of his initial decision to take it. Kerala's local newspapers are abuzz with stories of the continuing factionalism and mutual distrust within the CPI(M) in Kerala. They point out that Achuthanandan's faction is a minority in the cabinet which is dominated by the powerful

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party secretariat members from the opposite camp.

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A HARDLINER LIMITED BY HIS OWN PAST CAMPAIGNS  
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19. (SBU) Achuthanandan also has a reputation for opposing all reform and development. His opponents have described him as "communist hardliner," and as one "belonging to the ideological Jurassic Age when the party believed in its since-revised 1964-program of rigid anti-imperialism, anti-feudalism and anti-monopoly." Much of this perception is based on his own campaigns and statements as the opposition leader. For example, opposing the UDF Government's "Modernization of Government Plan" which was aided by the Asian Development Bank in 2002, Achuthanandan went to the extent of warning that a future LDF government would not repay the ADB loan. In 2006, Achuthanandan strongly opposed the signing of the agreement for \$350 million "Smart City Project" for Cochin, a software infrastructure project of Dubai Internet City (DIC) which promised 33,000 jobs. Achuthanandan's contention was that the terms of the transfer of land and buildings were too advantageous to the company.

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LIMITED ENGLISH, RELUCTANT HOST  
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¶10. (SBU) Achuthanandan's English is limited although he can understand and speak the language at a very basic level. He will have difficulty sustaining long conversations with foreigners or engaging in small talk. He has been reluctant to meet U.S. diplomats in the past. On one occasion when he agreed to receive a Consul General in 1994, he cut the meeting short without apologies. He has visited Russia, China, Mongolia, and the U.K.

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PERSON AND FAMILY  
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¶11. (SBU) At 83, Achuthanandan enjoys fairly good health. He practices yoga and strictly controls his diet. He reportedly wakes at five in the morning and goes to bed at midnight, while maintaining a busy schedule throughout the day. He is married to Vasumathy who retired as Head Nurse from the Alleppey Medical College. They have a son and a daughter. Their son, V.A. Arun Kumar, is Joint Director at the Institute for Human Resource Development (IHRD), Kerala. Daughter V.V. Asha, Ph.D. in ethno-pharmacology, is a scientist at the Rajiv Gandhi Center for Bio-Technology, Thiruvananthapuram.

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OUTLOOK: CASE-BY-CASE APPROACH; POLICY CONSERVATISM  
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¶12. (SBU) COMMENT: Lack of administrative experience has kept Achuthanandan away from economic realities and political pragmatism. It remains to be seen whether it is now too late for this octogenarian to change his stripes as his West Bengal counterparts have done. At least in some cases, such as on Coca Cola's bottling plant at Palakkad, his constituency district, it will be difficult for him to retreat from his previous extreme positions. Opting for a case-by-case approach, he will, however, remain friendly to non-controversial investors such as U.S. Technology Resources in the Thiruvananthapuram Technopark. On the whole, his tenure is likely to be marked by a lack of dynamism on the business front. The continuing feud in the party and cabinet could further slow down decisions. Already behind the other three south Indian states in attracting investments and enhancing infrastructure, Kerala's economic development prospects do not look bright for the near term. END COMMENT

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